

Transcript - recording Cecilia Oubel and Suzanne Rowlands: Significant concepts

(Clip 1)

Suzanne: Hi. My name is Suzanne Rowlands and I work at the IB Cardiff office. We have the pleasure of having Cecilia Oubel here with us. She is our Middle Years Programme specialist and pedagogical advisor in the Americas. Good morning Cecilia.

Cecilia: Hi Suzanne.

Suzanne: Cecilia, I know you work closely with workshop leaders in your region. Could you tell us a little about the challenges that teachers and even the workshop leaders face at this time, with for example, the MYP unit planner?

Cecilia: Yes. One of the challenges teachers face when working with the new MYP unit planner is defining and identifying the significant concepts that the students will understand in the unit; in other words, what are the enduring ideas, the significant ideas, which they expect their students to understand in that particular unit? And regarding this, I usually recommend that they clearly identify the theme or topic of the unit, which will include learning several things. Not everything learned in a unit constitutes conceptual learning. In a unit students will learn skills, factual content, dates, data, but there will be some, more profound intellectual and conceptual learning as well; and this is what they have to identify in this first stage.

Suzanne: Could you give some suggestions as to how this is done exactly? For example, what process do they have to follow?

Cecilia: A very simple tool to use some basic questions; there are questions that are very useful for teachers when defining these significant ideas. You must think about 'What do I want the students to understand?', and try to articulate it also as an affirmative statement, where it is no longer a question but rather a statement like 'I want the students to understand...', and you link this to some significant concept of the discipline.

Suzanne: Right, in fact that was going to be one of my next questions. How do you formulate this understanding or significant concept?

Cecilia: While the box may say 'Significant concepts', we consider that the students will retain enduring ideas. Therefore we do not expect to see a whole list of concepts but rather that these concepts are articulated as some sort of affirmative statement. To clarify this we can use an example, if that's OK. If we are working on ancient Egypt and we want the students to understand something related to cultures; we might hope they would understand that all cultures satisfy human needs in a similar ways, but at the same time, that there are some aspects which are different. This would then be the way to connect these concepts; in this case the concept of culture and the concept of human needs. These two are now linked and therefore you generate a more profound understanding.

Suzanne: So what would the teacher include in the 'Content' section of the planner for example with reference to this significant concept?

Cecilia: Right. In the 'Content' section the teacher will have to develop some data and factual elements, which will help the students' understanding of this past, remote culture; there will be knowledge related to history and geography; there will be skills to be developed for working with sources; they will learn for example how palaeontologists work, how we know what we know today about ancient Egypt; but these contents will be developed as a support to the intellectual understanding. For this reason we place it in stage 2. They are essential to supporting understanding. I am glad you asked about this Suzanne as some teachers sometimes ask 'Well then if everything is intellectual concepts or profound concepts, then the students no longer have to study anything? There is no memory involved, nothing to know?' Yes there is and it is essential. Understanding is based on these facts and data, factual knowledge which do not go out of fashion because we need them to generate more profound understanding; but then what happens to the students —what they retain after time— is what we refer to as enduring understandings; we can later forget these facts and data, the dates when the ancient Egyptians were around, but we will remember that the way this culture satisfied their needs has many similarities and differences with other cultures.

Suzanne: Thank you. So what can you tell us about the scope of significant concepts?

Clip 2

Cecilia: Sometimes we plan units that have concepts that are very specific to the discipline in question, and there are some concepts as in the example we were discussing earlier, which are much broader concepts. The example of culture, for instance: the concept of culture transcends the disciplines of history, geography, and even the social sciences, and it can be applied to interdisciplinary work. But it would also be acceptable for teachers to work on a history unit with concepts that are specific to that discipline; history, palaeontology and archaeology. So we point out that it is important for teachers to work on the specific concepts of the discipline but also on broader, more encompassing concepts that can be related to others, which will then allow them to develop interdisciplinary units...

Suzanne: Thank you. And as you mentioned, you cannot do everything in one unit; there is no need to include an unlimited number of significant concepts.

Cecilia: Definitely. The number of concepts that students need to learn in one discipline are several, but not an infinite number. Students will revisit these concepts; they will come across them throughout their school years in different degrees of depth and complexity. They will come across these concepts in a number of different opportunities. This is why it is important for the teacher to consider—and we ask this on stage 2—'What do the students need to know? What should they know in order to move forward in this content? '

Suzanne: Could you explain a little the relationship of this to the unit question? Why do we have the area of interaction, the significant concept and the unit question, and even summative assessment? Are these all related to each other?

Cecilia: Absolutely. It is important to keep in mind that these significant concepts that we have defined serve as our compass or our horizon which we must not lose sight of. Thus, the unit

question that will spark the inquiry must lead us in that direction. That is, if the concept is very intellectually profound, if the level of abstraction is very high, the question cannot be a factual or a superficial question. In other words, the question cannot be 'When did the ancient Egyptians live?' or 'What were the Egyptians like?' as this will not be enough to obtain the understanding that I am pursuing. And at the same time the tasks, the work I will present to the students to assess their understanding should be directly linked so as to answer the question. Therefore, there must be continuous articulation and consistency between what I want the students to understand, what will constitute evidence that they understood it, and the unit question that will spark the inquiry. This will then reassure me that the unit will focus on that particular topic and not anything else.

Suzanne: Of course the students can use data, contents information in order to answer ...

Cecilia: Absolutely

Suzanne: ...the question, and the summative task.

Cecilia: They will need it and they will learn lots of other things in addition to the conceptual content that we have proposed as a concept, or significant understanding.

Suzanne: Yes, thank you. Could you suggest some resources that teachers could use or...?

Cecilia: Yes. I always recommend that teachers first and foremost have a good and profound knowledge of the subject guide. There are MYP guides that are very specific and provide good guidance in regards to what significant concepts need to be developed. Furthermore, I suggest reading material from authors like Wiggins y McTighe, which are translated into Spanish; all the material regarding the learning framework in order to understand Harvard's Project Zero, which is material that has inspired the development of the MYP unit planner; materials by Lynn Erickson, from the ASCD [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development], which although they do not provide us with definite answers—they will not develop the unit for us, as these cannot be bought as pre-fabricated products, they are decisions that are important for the teacher to make—they are materials that will help us think about our disciplines, our teaching of these disciplines and especially about why we teach what we teach, and what is worth understanding.

Suzanne: And as you mentioned, it is a process that must be done collaboratively with other teachers...

Cecilia: That is essential; understanding benefits mutually and working with others you can move forward and in more depth than what you can do personally on your own. It is challenging and very beneficial.

Suzanne: Yes, and another way to do this is—I will advertise the use of the online curriculum centre—by posting questions on the discussion forum or even submitting their queries to you at the regional office.

Cecilia: Absolutely; and to share good ideas and good practices about understanding.

Suzanne: Yes, on the online curriculum centre. Well, thank you very much Cecilia...

Cecilia: Not at all, thank you Suzanne.

Suzanne: ...and thank you all. Good bye for now.

Cecilia: Good bye.